

BBC Production

Training & Development Unit

**Your
programme
idea**

Developing yourself

5-minute reads

Your programme idea

Ever thought of that programme idea but never been quite sure how to pull it together?

This booklet offers advice for anyone up to researcher/BA level to help you get the idea on paper, present it to your editor and have it taken seriously.

We can't help you come up with a good idea – that rests with you. Nor can we offer you a comprehensive guide to gain you access to the channel commissioners.

What we can offer is advice on presentation, items you should consider, what you should put in and what you should leave out. Don't worry if you find this booklet too comprehensive or you can't identify with everything in it – it is your idea that is important. But hopefully this will give you food for thought and help you get your idea together.

Commissioning Briefs

Each channel issues a Commissioning Brief giving details of their requirements for the forthcoming year. Get hold of these or ask your Editor what the priorities for the channels are. If you can target your idea towards the requirements of the briefs you will be meeting the specific needs of the channels and stand a better chance of getting your programme off the ground. Briefs will usually consist of the following:

Genre: Usually fall into distinct categories, i.e. Factual, Music, Entertainment, Drama and Children's.

Programme or editorial guide: Information on the type of programme, e.g. strong and attractive 30-minute documentary series or entertaining factual programmes aimed at young children. They may also advise on programme content, e.g. human interest, history, leisure, lifestyle.

Duration: You will know from the schedules and the programmes you have worked on that commissioners look for all types from 10-minute shorts to 1-hour documentaries to whole evenings given over to one theme.

Day and time/slot: Think where in the schedules your idea would fit – daytime, evening, post-watershed?

Audience: Closely linked with the day and time are the audience who would be watching at that time. The BBC has identified groups of people defined by lifestages (e.g. young singles, parents of young children), their leisure interests (e.g. passionate about DIY or gardening) or by their ethnicity, special needs (e.g. the deaf), social circumstances (e.g. those on very low incomes) and geography (e.g. the North West). A report on the 'tribes' is available on Gateway for those who want to know more.

Budget: Programme budgets are complicated, so leave them to your department's finance people and don't worry about trying to pull one together. It really is the idea your editor is concerned with. However, you should be aware of financial implications as they could have an impact on your programme. The technical resources you require, i.e. if you are filming on DV, whether it is studio based or on location or the number of locations involved, particularly if you require foreign travel, can all increase the budget.

If your programme does not fit the commissioning briefs don't despair. Ask yourself if it addresses a subject or audience not represented by current schedules. If your answer is 'yes', use this as a unique selling point.

Skills required

Communication: Presenting one's idea and thoughts in a way that is clearly understood by other parties.

Analytical thinking: Simplifying complex problems, processes or projects into component parts, exploring and evaluating them systematically.

Editorial judgement: Balanced and objective judgement based on a thorough understanding of channel requirements, target audience and department objectives.

Creative thinking/imagination: Generating creative ideas/impulses and turning them into working briefs. Looking at existing situations and problems in novel ways and coming up with creative solutions.

Getting your idea together

Research your subject thoroughly. The more you know your subject matter the better placed you will be to identify the interesting facts and turn these into selling points for your idea. Your research should also involve viewing programmes transmitting now or in the archive to find out what has already been commissioned. Check that your programme idea is original and has not been done before. If you find something similar, try and work out what is different about your idea or how you can make it unique.

Once you've gathered as much information together as possible try working it in different ways. Break down your idea into programme items or subjects and develop a few of the best ones. Consider how will they work on air or on screen, what information you want to get across and how you would want them presented.

If you feel your idea lacks cohesion and you don't know how to present it, consolidate your thinking by summing the idea up in one sentence. Then write down the key points on paper or post-its and try making connections between them or placing them in order of priority. If you are still having problems try seeking advice from a colleague you respect and trust.

Spend some time identifying the person in the department you should take your idea to. Canvass opinions from trusted colleagues and get another opinion before going to editorial level. You don't want to hand in anything that won't be taken seriously or present you in a bad light, so take on board their suggestions.

Throw nothing away. Although you won't need to present everything in your proposal, keep all your notes as they may come in useful if and when you get the opportunity to discuss your idea with your editor.

Presenting your idea

Keep your proposal to one page. No matter how much you feel you have to say, your editor is probably inundated with proposals from other people and will not want, or have time, to read more than one side.

- This is where you sell your idea, so think carefully about what you write and how you word it.
- If you haven't done so already try and think of a snappy one-line or brief paragraph that sums up the programme content and start with this.
- If you are meeting a commissioning brief simply list your response. Don't waste valuable space writing it up in a paragraph or discussing it.
- Use the rest of the space to describe the content of the programme and what they are going to hear or see.
- Be as specific as possible, giving examples of what they are going to hear or see, e.g. the programme begins with sound archive of..., or opens to wide shot of the Thames zooming in to presenters on a boat.
- Bring your idea to life by describing how it would sound or look. You may want to include a summary of the ideas you worked on earlier as good examples.
- Don't assume they know your subject or what you are trying to achieve. Go through it step by step.
- Give ideas for presenters. For certain subjects or genres there may be a particular presenter that springs to mind.
- Don't get involved in long discussions or background information but get straight to the point.
- Highlight the key points you have identified earlier.

- Make use of headings or bullet points to help cut out excessive waffle.
- Get hold of a proposal that has been successful and look at the content, the structure and the language.
- Make your proposal easy to read – look at the presentation of your document and check your spelling and grammar.

Tips on your programme idea

- Make sure the programme hasn't been done before. If it has do you have a unique angle or a new way of presenting it?
- Get a feel for the channel or network you are pitching the idea at. Each one has an individual identity, so consider how your idea fits in with their programming.
- How will this programme engage the audience?
- Are you building on a strength already associated with your department? Commissioners are always keen to build on brand names and personalities.
- If you're telling a story how will you do it, e.g. through reconstruction, personal accounts? You should also consider your editorial slant. What are you trying to say and are you offering fair representation?
- Identify your likely contributors and think how will you find them.
- Is there a peg on which to hang your idea, e.g. are we commemorating an anniversary or marking an occasion?
- Are you making use of new technology such as DV or Sadie and could you turn your idea into something interactive?

And finally...

Good and successful programming relies on innovation and risk-taking. So let your imagination run riot and don't be afraid to have a go!

These booklets are available in hard copy or as an electronic file.
Please contact Deryn Holland at BBC Production Training & Development Unit
020 8225 6870, Room 6079 Television Centre or email Production Training

Compiled by BBC Production Training & Development Unit
Designed by Education Production Print Media, September 1999

© BBC Production Training & Development Unit
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be photocopied, recorded or otherwise
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or
mechanical means without prior permission of the copyright owner.